

School Evaluation Services

Fact or Fiction:

Data Tell the True Story Behind America's Urban School Districts

INTRODUCTION

Over the years there have been a number of observations made by researchers, the media, policymakers and parents about the perceived shortcomings of our urban school districts. Some say urban school districts spend more than other districts while showing little improvement; others claim that high drop out rates are a problem for impoverished, urban minorityⁱ students, not suburban white children; or that schools have done little to help poor and minority kids learn.

As Katrina Kelley, director of the National School Boards Association's Council of Urban Boards of Education, told the *American School Boards Journal* in December 2003, "There's a collective understanding that urban schools mean poor children...schools that don't do well, a government that doesn't function well, a system in turmoil, and people throwing their hands up at what to do. That perception is out there, painted in broad strokes, and it's a hard one to shake."ⁱⁱⁱ

Whether these and other perceptions are born out of gossip, selective use of data or have some other origin, many run counter to the facts. To distinguish between fact and fiction, a number of efforts have been made over the past two decades. Most recently, the Council of Great City Schools reported in "Beating the Odds V" that students in 65 of the country's largest districts are making gains in the essential subjects of reading and math.ⁱⁱⁱ

This paper focuses on an analysis by Standard & Poor's that is consistent with this earlier research. These findings are a result of data and comparative tools compiled and developed by Standard & Poor's for SchoolMatters.com, a project of the National Education Data Partnership. SchoolMatters.com was developed to help education stakeholders in urban areas, as well as around the country, to use empirical evidence and information to make better-informed decisions about the direction of their schools and school systems.

Unique in its approach, this analysis brings together a wide range of indicators that help to better illustrate the state of America's urban school districts. The scope of this analysis aligns with the holistic approach and analytical framework used on SchoolMatters.com. By examining multiple indicators, including student performance, spending and revenue, the classroom environment and demographic information, Standard & Poor's believes its research offers a deeper understanding of school and district performance than is gleaned by analyzing single indicators in isolation or out of context.

For this paper, Standard & Poor's examined 25 of the largest urban school districts in the U.S. The data reveal that progress is being made, and that perceptions are not always reality. Standard & Poor's chose these districts based on several criteria and drew on data

available from SchoolMatters.com that was collected from the U.S. Census Bureau, the National Center for Education Statistics and state departments of education.

To be selected for this analysis, districts were required to:

- represent true urban centers. Districts that encompass both cities and suburban areas, which might not accurately reflect a clear urban environment, were not selected;
- represent a cross section of urban districts from different geographic regions of the country; and
- report sufficient student performance data, including disaggregated test scores by race/ethnicity and poverty.

The result: each district in this sample is located in a metropolitan area with an average population of 1.2 million, and has an average population density of more than 5,000 people per square mile. Further, districts in this sample had an average student population of 163,000 students.

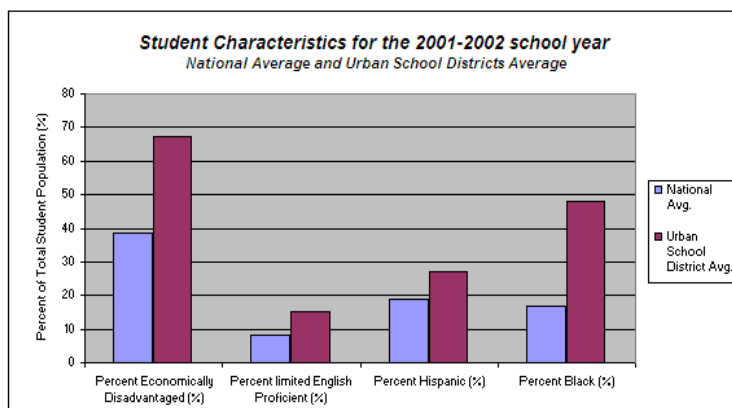
CHALLENGES FACING URBAN DISTRICTS

It is commonly known that inner city youth face challenges to succeed academically.^{iv} Compared to non-urban settings, these factors can create difficult environments for raising student achievement. In the community at large many of these students experience greater exposure to poverty, violence, crime, substance abuse and racial and economic discrimination. Even within the family, there may be challenges such as greater family mobility rates, less stable home environments, higher levels of stress and less than adequate health care.

Of the 25 districts in this analysis, all have greater economically disadvantaged and English language learner populations than the national average (see Figure 1).^v These

districts also have higher proportions of racial and ethnic minorities. In fact, in some districts more than 85% of the student population is African-American.^{vi} Similarly, some of the districts' student populations are more than 70% Hispanic.^{vii} The education attainment of the adults in the community, which is correlated with student achievement levels, was also lower in these districts compared to the national average.^{viii}

Figure 1.



The sheer size of urban districts compared to other districts also presents multiple challenges, such as a higher potential for overcrowding of schools. While the districts in this analysis account for less than one half of a percent of the districts in the U.S., they account for almost 10% of the country's student population.

Such environmental and contextual challenges for urban districts put a disproportionate level of pressure on staff in these districts beyond normal circumstances. As a result, teacher, principal and superintendent turnover rates for many of these districts are higher than usual. On average, an urban school superintendent remains in the job less than five years versus the nationwide average of just more than seven years.^{ix} Often, the lack of consistency among district leaders puts a large district in a state of 'transition' rather than stability.

Many of these challenges would hinder the progress and steady improvement of any district, let alone those working to educate a much larger population.

THE MYTHS

Clearly, urban school districts face significant challenges. However, observations about their performance should be made on sound data and empirical evidence, not on unfounded perceptions and anecdotes. Standard & Poor's has chosen to examine what are believed to be four common misperceptions about America's urban school districts. In keeping with the holistic approach taken by Standard & Poor's, these myths center on districts' finances, academic performance and community demographics.

Myth 1: Urban Districts Spend More Than Other Districts

Urban school districts are often criticized for being some of the highest spending districts in their states. Perceptions about district finances are often misinformed.

The perception could be a result of data that show that many urban districts spend more than the national average. Standard & Poor's found that the average core spending per pupil—which excludes expenditures that are less likely to directly support instruction, and that may lack comparability between school systems, such as transportation, food services, building construction and debt payments—of the urban districts examined in this analysis was \$8,035; that is \$984 more per student than the national average.^x While it is also true that nearly three-quarters, or 72% of urban districts in this analysis are spending more than their respective state averages, it is not widely known that when spending is adjusted for differences in the purchasing power of the dollar, and for students with special needs, many of these urban districts are spending

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less relative to non-urban districts. *In fact, after making these adjustments, 70% of the districts in this study are spending below the state average. So while it remains true that in absolute terms these urban districts are spending more than their suburban and rural counterparts, a vast majority of them are spending proportionally (on an adjusted basis) less per student than other districts relative to the needs of their student populations.*

It is important to consider these types of adjustments to provide an “apples to apples” comparison of districts and state spending. To do this, Standard & Poor’s has applied two different cost adjusters to more accurately reflect geographic differences in the purchasing power of the dollar, and the higher cost of educating students with special needs.

Typically, a district spends more for supplemental programs to educate students with special needs—those with economically disadvantaged backgrounds, limited English proficiency or who are enrolled in special education classes—than it might otherwise spend for general education. While there is no commonly accepted conclusion about how much it actually costs to educate students with special needs in order for them to perform at the same level as a student without special needs or at some other specified target, there are prevailing estimates of the additional money school districts tend to spend to educate these students. Using these spending estimates as proxies for the relative cost, Standard & Poor’s calculates the adjusted value necessary to educate students with special needs. For instance, research by Standard & Poor’s indicates that districts may spend about 1.35 times as much to educate an economically disadvantaged student as one who is not.

Likewise, geographic characteristics are important in understanding the purchasing power of the dollar, especially when comparing urban districts’ spending to suburban and rural districts within a state. For example, the amount of goods that a dollar can buy in an urban setting is typically much less than those that can be purchased in a rural setting. Therefore, Standard & Poor’s uses a Geographic Cost Adjuster to improve the comparability of spending levels between districts within a state.

To illustrate the impact that geography and students with special needs have on spending in urban districts, it is helpful to more closely examine two practical cases rather than discussing their influence in the abstract.

In 2002, New York City enrolled 38% of the state’s students and received approximately the same proportion of state aid, 39%. Yet, the 1.1 million schoolchildren in New York City Public Schools comprised 63% of the state’s economically disadvantaged students and 74% of its English language learners. However, during that same school year, when adjusted for geographic costs and student needs, New York City’s core spending was *less* than the state average (\$6,170 per student compared to the state average of \$7,315 per student).

Standard & Poor's found similar patterns in the Philadelphia Public Schools where students made up almost one-quarter of the state's total economically disadvantaged student population and nearly one-third of its English language learners. Yet, in 2002, Philadelphia Public Schools spent \$1,333 *less* per student on core operating expenses than the state average when adjusted for geographic costs and student needs.

Myth 2: Academic Performance in Urban Districts is Not Improving

It is true that urban school districts' academic performance in reading and math often lags behind state averages. For example, Los Angeles lags 10 percentage points behind the state average of 37% on reading and math proficiency. Similar findings were noted in Texas where school districts in Austin, Dallas and Houston lag 4, 11 and 8 percentage points, respectively, behind the state average of 80%.

Where data are available, almost 80% of urban districts in this analysis had larger gains in reading and math proficiency rates...when compared to the average proficiency gains of their respective states.

Despite the gap between urban school districts and their suburban and rural counterparts, *many urban school districts are making faster gains on their Reading and Math Proficiency (RaMP) than their respective state average gains.* RaMP is a ratio created by Standard & Poor's as an aggregate measure of students that score at a proficient level on state reading and math tests.^{xi} *In fact, gains in RaMP for these urban districts are greater than state averages.* Where data are available, almost 80% of urban districts in this analysis had larger gains in reading and math from the 2001-02 to 2002-03 school year when compared to the average proficiency gains of their respective states.^{xii} In some urban school districts, the increase in proficiency was two times larger than the state average. For example, in Boston Public Schools the increase in proficiency was two times as large as the state average (2.6 percentage points versus 1.3 percentage points). For the largest school system in the country, New York City Public Schools, the gains in proficiency were 4.3 percentage points compared to 2.6 percentage points.

Myth 3: Low Test Scores, Graduation Rates and College Attendance Rates Are Primarily an Urban, Minority Problem

While minority students often lag behind the academic performance of other students, this pattern does not mean that white students are without their own challenges. In fact, there are greater numbers of white students who are failing key academic measures than minority students.

Much of the discussion about our education system today focuses on the achievement of minority students and the need to improve the schools these students attend—urban schools. These conversations are pertinent; indeed, achievement gaps between minority and white students exist.

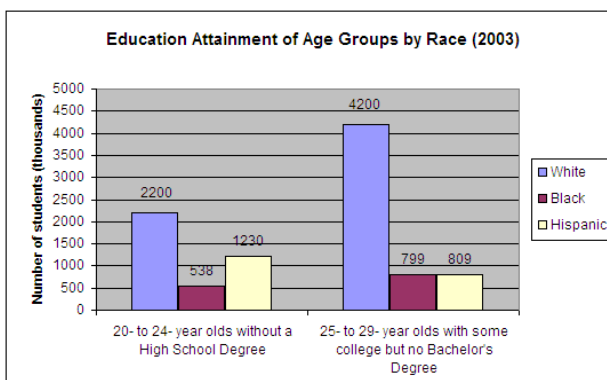
There are greater numbers of white students who are failing key academic measures than minority students.

For example, the NAEP exam shows clear gaps in achievement between Hispanic and African-American students and their white counterparts. But white students, although scoring on average higher than minority students, represent the largest group (in actual numbers) of students that are not proficient in reading, math or science.

Similarly, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, African-Americans and Hispanics, as a proportion of their respective populations, have lower graduation rates, but white students make up a much larger number of students who do not receive a high school diploma. Among white adults ages 20 to 24, close to 14% of the population does not possess a high school degree. That is nearly equivalent to a city the size of Chicago, the third largest city in the nation (2.2 million). For African-Americans and Hispanics, the rates of non-completion are higher, 19 percent and 35 percent respectively,

but the number of whites without a high school diploma widely outpaces African-Americans and Hispanics (2.2 million versus 538,000 and 1.23 million, respectively).^{xiii}

Figure 2.



Moreover, in 2003, nearly 56 percent of 25- to 29-year old white students that went to college never graduated with a bachelor's degree, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The percentage of African-American and Hispanic students who went to college but did not receive a bachelor's degree was much higher, 69 percent and 71 percent, respectively. Despite higher proportions of African-American and Hispanic students not graduating from college with a four-year or two-year degree, a larger number of whites—4.2 million versus 799,000 and 809,000—never attain a four-year or two-year college degree.^{xiv}

Myth 4: Urban Schools do Little to Help Students Learn

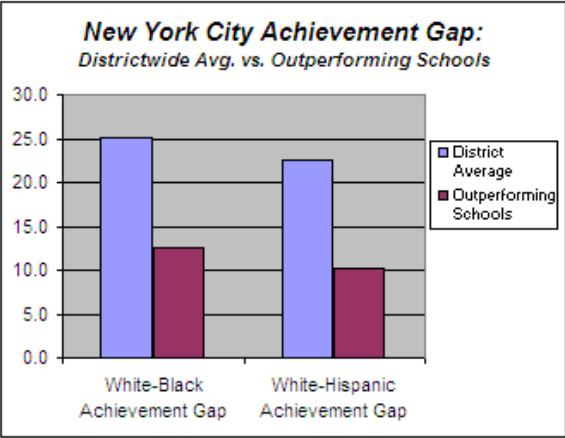
Standard & Poor's analysis revealed that not only are there urban schools that performed better than the district and state averages, but some schools are achieving high levels of student performance. For example, where data are available, Standard & Poor's found 397 *outperforming schools*, or just over 14% of all schools in this sample, managed to raise student achievement on their RaMP score above the state average even though they have high concentrations of impoverished students. Standard & Poor's defines *outperforming schools* as those where 75% of the student population is economically disadvantaged yet their RaMP score is above the state average.^{xv} More compelling perhaps is how high the schools scored in these districts relative to the district averages. For example, in Dade County School District (Miami, FL) 18 schools scored, on average, 17 points above the

Standard & Poor's found that these urban schools were able to significantly raise the achievement of their minority populations.

district average and had a higher concentration of economically disadvantaged students (85% compared to 63%).

Where data were available, Standard & Poor's found that these urban schools were able to significantly raise the achievement of their minority populations—particularly African-

Figure 3.



students and white students was 10 percentage points, compared to 23 percentage points for all schools.

Of the 397 schools that were identified as outperforming schools, the majority were elementary schools. However, in a few urban districts including New York City Public Schools and Hillsborough County School District (Tampa, FL) there were several high schools that met the criteria. These schools, as well as those elementary schools, may serve as a starting point for a more enriched discussion about how school leaders and teachers are achieving such relatively high rates of success with their students.

CONCLUSION

As urban education leaders face mounting challenges, including state and federal accountability measures, budget pressures and calls for an improved school environment, it is important to gain a better understanding of these complex issues and how they may contribute to student performance.

Despite these challenges, Standard & Poor's analysis shows there are many examples of urban schools and districts that have stood in the face of criticism and performed above expectations. Moreover, this analysis shows that in some instances the country's largest urban districts are making bigger gains than the majority of their fellow in-state districts. This analysis should serve as a starting point for further investigation and dialogue about

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the positive qualities that urban districts share and exhibit. This is not to say that future change is not needed, but rather that the education community should capitalize on the practices that some high-achieving local communities and urban schools are using to raise student achievement in difficult learning environments.

For more information about the performance of urban school districts or districts and schools in other locales, visit www.schoolmatters.com.

Appendix A

25 of the Largest School Districts Used for Standard & Poor's Analysis

1. New York City Public Schools
2. Los Angeles Unified School District
3. Chicago Public Schools
4. Dade County School District
5. Houston Independent School District
6. Philadelphia City School District
7. Hillsborough County School District
8. Detroit Public Schools
9. Dallas Independent School District
10. Baltimore City Public School District
11. San Diego Unified School District
12. Milwaukee Public Schools
13. Jefferson County Public Schools
14. Austin Independent School District
15. Denver County School District
16. Orleans Parish School Board
17. Cleveland Municipal School District
18. Nashville-Davidson County School District
19. District of Columbia Public Schools
20. Boston Public Schools
21. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools
22. Atlanta City Public Schools
23. Seattle School District
24. Minneapolis Public Schools
25. Newark City Public Schools

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- ⁱ For the purposes of this paper, minority students refer to African-American and Hispanic students.
- ⁱⁱ Reprinted with permission from *American School Board Journal*, December 2003. Copyright 2003 National School Boards Association. All rights reserved.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Council of Great City Schools. March 2005. *Beating the Odds V: A City-by-City Analysis of Student Performance and Achievement Gaps on State Assessments. Results from the 2003-2004 School Year*. Washington, DC.
- ^{iv} Agron, Joe. *The Urban Challenge*. American School and University. July 1, 1998. http://asumag.com/mag/university_urban_challenge; Hannaway, J., Murphy, M., Reed, J. 2004. *Leave No City Behind: England/United States Dialogue on Urban Education Reform*. Joint project by the Education Policy Center of the Urban Institute and the Center for Research in Human Development and Education of Temple University. http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311123_LNCB.pdf; Christman, J. & Rhodes, A. 2002. *Civic Engagement and Urban School Improvement: Hard-to-Learn Lessons from Philadelphia*. Consortium for Policy Research in Education: University of Pennsylvania. <http://www.cpre.org/Publications/children07.pdf>.
- ^v Similar to calculations of urban district sample and national averages for economically disadvantaged and English Language Learner (ELL) students, percentages are expressed as a weighted average. That is, averages are the overall urban district or national average, *not* the average district.
- ^{vi} Atlanta Public Schools, Baltimore City Schools, Orleans Parish School Board and Detroit Public Schools had African-American student populations that accounted for over 85% of the total student population in the 2002-03 school year.
- ^{vii} Los Angeles Unified Public Schools had Hispanic student populations that accounted for over 70% of the total student population in the 2002-03 school year.
- ^{viii} Hwang, H.W. 2001. *Factors Related to Individual Differences in the Academic and Behavioral Adjustment of Young Children from Low-income Families*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Michigan State University. DAI, 62, no. 12A (2001): 4348; White, M. and Kaufman, G. 1997. *Language usage, social capital, and school completion among immigrants and native-born ethnic groups*. *Social Science Quarterly* 78 (2): 385-398; Hernández-Murillo, R. and Roisman, D. April 2004. *Tough Lesson: More Money Doesn't Help Schools; Accountability Does*. Regional Economist; Sarigiani, P. A., Wilson, J. L., Peterson, A. C., & Viocay, J. R. (1990). *Self-image and educational plans of adolescents from two contrasting communities*. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 10, 37-45.
- ^{ix} Average urban schools superintendent tenure was drawn from surveys of urban school districts indicating the tenure of the immediate past superintendent. Work published in Council of Great City Schools. 2003. *Urban School Superintendents: Characteristics, Tenure, and Salary*. Washington, DC; National School Boards Association. 2002. *CUBE Survey Report: Superintendent Tenure*. Washington, DC; and Glass, T. *Superintendent Leaders Look at the Superintendency, Schools Boards and Reform*. ECS Issue Paper. Denver: Education Commission of the States, 2001. Nationwide average superintendent tenure was drawn from answers to a national survey to a representative sample of school district superintendents. Work published in Cooper, B.S., Fusarelli, L.D., & Carella, V.A. (2000). *Career crisis in the school superintendency? The results of a national survey*. Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators.
- ^x A measure of spending on core operating activities. These expenditures are associated with operating activities that directly support the instruction of students (e.g., instruction). Core Spending excludes expenditures that are less likely to directly support instruction, and that may lack comparability between

school systems, such as daily operating expenditures for transportation, food services and enterprise operations. For more information, go to www.schoolmatters.com.

^{xi} The measure of reading and math proficiency used by Standard & Poor's is RaMP (Reading and Math Proficiency). It is a ratio created by Standard & Poor's as an aggregate measure of students that achieve a proficient level across the core subjects of reading and math. RaMP allows users to quickly identify the relative progress toward an established goal of a school, school district or state in two of the most critical areas of education: reading and math. The RaMP score is an indicator that tracks a school or school district's performance against the No Child Left Behind-mandated target of 100% proficiency, as well as a summary measure for comparisons to state, regional and peer benchmarks. For more information, go to www.schoolmatters.com.

^{xii} Trend data for Detroit Public Schools was from the 2002-2003 to the 2003-2004 school year.

^{xiii} U.S. Bureau of the Census. 2003. *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2003*. Washington, DC. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/educ-attn.html>.

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} Standard & Poor's defined "high concentrations of impoverished students" as those schools that had more than 75% of its students identified as being eligible for free- and/or reduced-price lunch under the National School Lunch Program. This school-level indicator is the best consistent and reliable proxy for those students that are considered economically disadvantaged.

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